

USING FINGERS FOR EYES

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

Using Fingers for Eyes

Cooperative Service to the Spiritual Life of the Blind

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BLINDNESS is decreasing among children but increasing among adults in America. Better care at birth, in infancy and childhood explains the decrease. Among adults, however, are not only the historic disease causes and the more recent hazards and accidents of industry and modern life but also the increase in longevity and, surprisingly, such modern causes as "high blood pressure, hardening of the arteries and diabetes."¹ More than half the Blind in the United States are over fifty-five years of age, and there are 11 per cent more blind men than women.¹

Though it may seem paradoxical, it really is natural that reading means more to the sightless than to the sighted. The Blind are cut off from ordinary life and activities and have extra time to read and to think. It is a frequent, though not inevitable result, that their thoughts turn to the inner life—the spiritual, and they desire help in Christian life and service—the "new life" that grows and gives to others. Many thus find blindness a blessing.

The loss of sight has roused sympathy through the ages. Christ seemed peculiarly sensitive about it and the Gospels record more miracles by him to cure blindness than any other physical ailment. In America, especially in recent years, much has been done by both private and public effort, to lighten this great handicap.

The Literate Blind

"Fingers for Eyes" focuses attention, not on the Blind generally, but on those who can read without sight.

Doubtless most who become Blind could read

when they could see; but only a small portion become literate through their finger tips.² After an acquaintance with the problem of the literate Blind that began twenty years ago, through supplying embossed Scriptures to them as one of my duties as a secretary of the American Bible Society, my amazement and admiration continue to grow over the achievement of the Blind in using fingers for eyes. It involves real intelligence, will power, persistence, and, particularly, a sensitiveness in finger tips. Highly educated adults are sometimes frustrated. What of those of small education and hardened finger tips?

During recent years embossed magazines and books in Braille³ have been appearing in increased numbers, chiefly through generous appropriations by the United States Congress. Public funds, however, are not used for religious literature.

How then is the spiritual need and hunger of the sightless being met? Inadequately and incompletely. The great Protestant churches of America—Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and others, from

whose ranks the bulk of the literate Blind come, have neglected for decades both their own



HELEN KELLER READING HER
JOHN MILTON MAGAZINE

² It is estimated that there are some 130,000 Blind in the United States, of whom some 25,000 can read Braille. Some two or three thousand whose fingers are not sensitive enough to read the small Braille points, can read the Moon system which, for the Blind, is what large type is to the sighted. In Braille the basis is an embossed domino six set upright and so small that the finger tip of a child can cover it. To the uninitiated the fact of a single unit might imply simplicity, but in it lies complexity. All the letters of the alphabet, all punctuation marks, all capitals, italics, underscoring, all numerals are made by omissions and combinations of these six points. Not only must the mind register and remember what each combination represents, but the fingers must register the relative positions of these points. For example, the single point may occur in any one of six positions and a two-point combination may be made in eighteen ways.

³ "Talking Books"—that is phonograph records of books, and the radio are real boons to the Blind and are being made available by Congress appropriation in considerable numbers. However, they do not take the place of books one may read and study and ponder any more for the sightless than they would for the sighted.

¹ Report of the Public Health Service on January 21, 1939.

Blind⁴ and the other Blind who form a part of the great home missions field. The relatively heavy expense of embossed printing, and the relatively limited number of Blind affiliated with each denomination, are chiefly responsible for this fact.

The John Milton Society

Realization of this neglect, and appeals of the Blind themselves for help in their spiritual life



READING BRAILLE

and service, brought about the incorporation of the "*John Milton Society*," taking its name from one who despite his own blindness rendered great service to generations of those having eyes to read. The Society is sponsored by the Councils of Home Missions, both general and women's, and by the International Council of Religious Education. Its purpose and field were defined as the supply of general religious magazines, Sunday school lessons or Bible studies, and religious books. In 1932 the monthly *John Milton Magazine* was launched for adults and in 1935 the monthly, *Discovery*, for boys and girls. Both are in "Braille." In 1937 a small book of standard hymns, words and music in Braille, the first of its kind, was issued.⁵ The production of three books has been authorized this year: "Daily Devotions," "Sunday School Manual for Teachers" and "Christmas Carols." The two magazines are free, as are the Sunday school papers for the sighted; but gifts from readers toward their production are encouraged and received. The sale of books helps to meet their cost.

The 2,500 monthly copies of the two magazines now reach from 10,000 to 12,000 blind readers,

⁴ To their credit a few religious bodies have been responding to this need but they are exceptions and the activity of most is quite recent. Also they are all keen on their own peculiar teachings. Naming them somewhat on the length of their service, they are: Roman Catholic, the Seventh-Day Adventist, the Church of God, Theosophist, Christian Science, Episcopal, Hebrew and a branch of the Lutheran.

⁵ This year the two magazines are being continued; though a long-standing appeal for a magazine in "Moon" is still deferred because it is a recurring expense without money as yet provided. "Moon" is to the blind what large print is to those who see.

who reside in all but one of the States and in twenty-eight other lands. This wide distribution is almost entirely due to the activities and interest of blind readers themselves. They have a way of passing magazines from one to another and this diminishes the expense of circulation. The foreign circulation has come entirely through the Blind themselves. Illustrations are constant. A blind reader in Texas passes her copy to a blind man in the same city who then sends it to a fellow blind Hebrew in London who eventually places it in a Hebrew home for the Blind, and reports that "they holler for more." Inmates of homes or institutions for the Blind make one or two copies suffice for all their members. A few copies sent to a State School for the Blind are read by many older pupils for their own pleasure and then are read by them to younger pupils not yet literate with their fingers. Home teachers of the Blind lend their copies to their students. A blind American missionary in China enjoys her own copy and passes it on to her blind Chinese teachers who use it with their blind pupils. A masseuse in Jerusalem gains refreshment herself and tells her patients what she has read.

Nearly one hundred blind ministers, missionaries (both home and foreign), and evangelists, acclaim the *John Milton Magazine* for the aid it gives them in their work and life. Twenty-one American denominations are represented by the blind ministry. Some are active pastors and preachers and often prepare their sermons from the *John Milton Magazine*. Some are evangelists;



BLIND GIRLS USING BRAILLE HYMN BOOK

some home missionaries; some retired and lonely and eager for good reading. All are grateful.

Among nearly eight hundred letters (several hundred in Braille) from blind readers recently received, about five hundred came from those who attend Sunday school, and of these over two hundred are actually Sunday school teachers, some

teacher from Australia eagerly asks for the magazine, the existence of which he had just learned. The custodian of a library for the Blind in South Africa appeals for its visits. A blind Japanese Sunday school teacher in Hawaii rejoices in its help. A blind Presbyterian missionary giving his life to India, an Episcopal rector with ten happy years of service in Kansas, an Evangelical Lutheran minister, executive officer of a State Commission for the Blind, are a few of those who rejoice in it. One of its earliest and strongest friends is an eloquent, forceful and successful blind Methodist minister whose church is filled at evening as well as at morning services, and who is in demand as a speaker before school, college, Rotarian and other audiences. To serve such is indeed a privilege.

The Major Need

The great bulk of the Blind are not ministers or teachers. Too often they are people limited in experience and resources, isolated in country and other localities, home-bound by physical disabilities. Not a few are deaf, others are bedridden, many have scant education and even scantier resources. To them the magazines bring cheer and inspiration, help and comfort and company.

"Next to the Bible it is my most treasured possession."

"I keep it by my bed to read in the sleepless hours of the night."

"I and my blind husband live in the hills of Vermont where we do not see even the postman more than once a week. What a comfort the *John Milton Magazine* is to us both."

Such sentences are typical expressions. Many a touching and telling tale could be recounted from the correspondence. The gist of it all is that they are hungry souls; eager for and sorely needing such help; and they gratefully rejoice in having it.

Sponsored by the Councils already named, the Society is helped by contributions from some Boards of Home Missions, Education, Sunday School, and Publication. For them, however, these years have been difficult, and their contributions furnish less than one-tenth of the heavy expense involved in producing the Braille publications. Additional help has come from one other organization interested in the spiritual welfare of the Blind and the Blind themselves contribute surprisingly. But it is necessary to secure 70% of the budget from individuals who are blessed with sight. Where knowledge of this work is spread, those grateful for their own physical eyesight rejoice in helping the sightless in their quest for spiritual aid and life.

ENCOURAGEMENT IN TIME OF CRISIS

Rev. C. Darby Fulton, Executive Secretary of the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Committee of Nashville, says that this is a day of unparalleled opportunity in mission work, and lists some outstanding reasons for encouragement:

The high spiritual purpose and morale of Christian missionaries.

The courage and steadfastness of the Chinese Christians.

The scattering of many believers to the provinces of West China has meant that they have carried the contagion of their faith into areas heretofore unreached by the Gospel.

The new friendship of the Chinese people for the missionary, growing out of the helpfulness and service he has shown in this emergency.

The enormously enhanced prestige of Christianity because such great national leaders as Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, Madame Chiang, and others who are guiding the nation in the present crisis, are themselves Christians.

The unprecedented open-heartedness of the people toward the Gospel, with their new longings for the assurances of faith in the midst of the uncertainties of the present conflict.

The return of missionaries and the reoccupation of all our stations.

The large crowds attending evangelistic services throughout the country, with many conversions and other evidences of spiritual awakening.

Thousands of Korean Christians standing fast under severe persecution.

The deep undercurrent of heart-hunger among the people of Japan.

The bond of fellowship that remains unbroken between Japanese and Chinese Christians.

The wide open doors in Africa and Brazil.

